

## I'll Hold Your Heart When It's Heavy by DerryBlues

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Aged-Up Character(s), Eleven is mentioned, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Fluff and Angst, I'm imagining them as 15/16, M/M, Mike Has Issues, Or at least it's implied, Past Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Post-Season/Series 01 AU, Since I can't write 12/13 year-olds, Suicidal Thoughts, Will Finds Out About The Cliff, kind of, sorry - Freeform

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, The Party (Stranger Things), Will Byers

**Relationships:** Will Byers & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2018-08-05

**Updated:** 2018-08-05

**Packaged:** 2022-04-22 05:20:52

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 6,675

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

Will finds out about what happened at the quarry and the horrible realization that he could have been rescued, could have come home only to find his best friend *dead* eats away at him.

When he goes to confront Mike, he gets more than he bargained for.

Because something's been eating away at Mike too, and it's time for him to fess up to a few things.

# I'll Hold Your Heart When It's Heavy

## Author's Note:

Never thought I'd write anything for the Stranger Things fandom but whoops, my hand slipped.

I just really wanted to touch on the whole Mike-jumped-off-a-cliff thing because, to my knowledge, it's never really brought up again. I couldn't resist putting a Byler spin on it because they're adorable and I wanted to explore how Will would possibly react to the story.

At least, that was the core of the idea here...then it gained a life of its own \*shrug\*

I messed with canon a little and am picturing them as 15/16ish because I can't, for the life of me, write 12/13-year-olds.

Anywho, enjoy!

Song credit to Carry On by Young Rising Sons.

*Oh my love, don't you worry*

*When the world gets cold*

*I'll hold your heart when it's heavy*

*And I won't let go, no*

*'Til my blood runs dry*

*I will never leave your side*

*Don't you worry*

*Oh, I know we'll carry on*

Returning to real life after spending the better part of a week trapped in an alternate dimension with a literal monster is...interesting.

Mostly in a good way. Really. Will could weep for joy at the simple things now—a warm bed, a safe place to call home, someone always a room or phone call away. The feeling of the sun on his skin and fresh air filling his lungs.

But it's a weird double-edged sword too, that brings with it crippling nightmares, an unshakable fear of the dark, and, occasionally, Will doing something freaky like coughing up a goddamn slug.

But it's fine. He's handling it.

Better than other people seem to be, at least. Because things are different for everyone else too, now.

If asked to describe Joyce Byers, most people would first think “overprotective”. And that was *before* Will went missing. He would hate the hovering—especially now that Jonathan hovers right there with her—but he understands. After being trapped in the Upside Down—cold and scared and *alone*—he sometimes wants to cling to them just as tightly.

But the changes don't just follow him home. He feels them at school, where classmates stare and whisper *zombie boy* when they think he can't hear them. At his friends' houses, where parents are just slightly too formal and cautious, always asking “does your mother know you're here?”, “is your brother picking you up?”.

He feels it with his friends too, pushing and pulling at the dynamics of the Party.

On one hand, there's no bonding experience quite like fighting a monster from a different dimension. On the other, they all have sharp edges that weren't there before, lingering anxieties that haunt them in their dreams and waking hours, making them jump at shadows and lash out in defense, even when there's no real threat. Even when it's just them alone, no bullies, no parents. And certainly no monsters.

So yeah, it takes a bit of getting used to. A different sort of growing pains that has nothing to do with their teenage years beginning to stack up.

With everyone on edge, Will sometimes feels like they're sitting on a powder keg, just one clash of those sharp edges, one spark away from exploding.

Any mention of Eleven lately has been enough to light the fuse.

That's not to say that Will hasn't heard about her. When Will had been recovering in the hospital, his friends had regaled him with all kinds of stories, excitedly talking over each other to tell him about their newfound, super-powered friend.

But once Will left the hospital and they all tried to get on with their normal lives, talking about Eleven became a touchy subject, particularly for Mike. At any mention of her, Dustin and Lucas would get sad or wistful, wondering what could have been were she still there. But Mike would react as if you were prodding a deep, festering wound. Will thinks he's finally starting to realize that she's really gone, is never coming back, and he can't quite accept it. So Mike hovers between denial and anger like a wayward ghost.

He's still mostly the same around Will, if not a little more withdrawn, but around the whole Party, he's been far quicker to anger.

Today, though, things seem relatively normal—the late afternoon sun casting a warm, orange glow through the Byers' kitchen. Dustin and Lucas tease each other like its any other day, pinching and pushing and grinning like loons, like their world didn't get literally flipped upside down a few months ago. Will's smile comes easy as he watches them, but, crammed as they are around the kitchen table, it's impossible to miss the storm clouds that simply won't lift from Mike's brow.

Will wants to reach across the table, soothe that tension away. Seeing Mike like this is hard—he just seems so *stuck* sometimes, and Will never knows how to pull him out of it. He's not good at that stuff. He's not...well, Mike.

It takes one offhand comment—just a simple “Man, I bet she would’ve thought this shit was weird as hell” from Dustin as they enter the fifth hour of their campaign—to turn everything sour.

Will watches with dismay as Mike’s entire body closes off and he gets that horrible, distant look in his eyes.

“Shit,” Dustin says. “Mike, I—”

“It’s fine,” Mike snaps, a bit too harshly.

A palpable tension settles over the table. It’s heavy and uncomfortable, and Will tries to alleviate it by launching right back into the story. “Ok. So. We were too late and the Queen was assassinated, right?”

“Right,” Mike says.

“What’s next?”

They push on with the game, but Dustin’s comment was like removing the support beam of a building and it doesn’t take long for the whole structure to collapse. Mike’s their Dungeon Master—their leader and storyteller—and as he grows more and more agitated it makes it almost impossible for the campaign to continue.

It’s like every word they speak prods at the wound, like even their physical presence makes Mike twitchy. There’s no real way to talk him down when he’s like this either, so they try their best to tiptoe around him, keep the conversation purely focused on the campaign.

But Mike doesn’t make it easy.

His words come out clipped and sharp, and when he’s not huffy or impatient, he’s distant, staring down at his hands and lost in his own world.

It doesn’t take long for Lucas to lose his patience, and after Mike completely zones out again, he finally snaps. “Jesus dude, Dustin just *mentioned* her. You can’t lose your shit every time she comes up.”

Mike’s face flickers, a subtle shift in his jaw and brow that Will can

only read as deep-rooted pain. The kind of pain where biting your tongue is all you can do to keep from screaming.

“I’m just saying,” Lucas continues, when Mike says nothing. “It’s been months now. We can’t keep tiptoeing around you, worrying that you’re gonna explode if we say the wrong thing. It’s ridiculous.”

“I’m sorry that I’m still grieving for our friend, Lucas,” Mike spits. He’s found his words now, and with the way his nails dig into the edge of the table, he’s itching for a fight. “She’s *gone*. Disappeared right in front of us. Don’t you even care?”

“Of *course* I care! I can’t believe you would even ask me that!”

“Guys—” Dustin starts.

“Well it sure doesn’t seem like it!” Mike cuts him off.

“Oh, I’m sorry. How am I *supposed* to be acting? Huh? Why don’t you tell me, Mike, because obviously you’re such an expert.”

“Fuck off!”

“*You* fuck off!”

“*Guys!*” Dustin pleads as both of his friends stand up from the table.

“Fine,” Mike says, as if Dustin hadn’t spoken. “Whatever. I’m going home.”

Will can only watch helplessly as his best friend storms out. Lucas watches him go, his jaw clenched just as tightly as his fists. There’s an awkward stretch of silence before Lucas sighs, scrubs a hand over his face, and says, “I think I’m gonna go too.”

“It’s getting late anyway,” Will says, hoping he sounds less rattled than he feels.

He walks Lucas and Dustin outside, where their bikes rest against the side of his house. Lucas grabs his, but before he leaves, he looks over at Will and says, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have lost my cool like that. And ignore Mike, he’s just being a little bitch.”

“Yeah,” Dustin agrees. “He just needs to cool down.”

*Yeah, but why?* Will wants to ask. He gets his friends’ frustration—feels it himself, to the extent that he *can* feel frustrated with Mike—but sometimes he wants to shake them. This is *Mike*. The same Mike who brought them all together, who helps them with their homework and takes punches for them at school. The same Mike who led the charge when Will went missing. Sure, Mike’s always had a temper, but he’s never been like *this*. So touchy and pissy and bitter. Something’s wrong, and Will doesn’t understand how he’s the only one who sees it. Or the only one who cares.

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” Lucas says, mounting his bike and pulling out into the street.

Dustin watches him go, but makes no move to follow. He hovers at the edge of Will’s driveway, fiddling with the handlebars of his bike.

“It fucked him up, I think.” Dustin finally says, turning back to look at Will. “Everything that happened. Like, I mean, it fucked us *all* up because, duh, monsters and shit. But Mike took it really hard, you know?”

Will nods, curious. Dustin fiddles with his handlebars some more, picking at the worn rubber coating and looking uncharacteristically contemplative. Will suddenly feels bad for ever assuming his friends didn’t care.

“I mean, you know Mike. He’s so goddamn protective. And he cares so much. Something I’ve never doubted is how much he cares about us. Even when he’s being a little bitch.” Will smiles and Dustin snorts a bit before continuing. “With everything that happened with the Upside Down...fuck, dude, we thought you were dead. That was hard enough for me, and I hope you know that this is not at all a knock on our friendship because I love you, but Mike? That really fucked him up the most.”

Will studies his shoes, stomach twisting with guilt. He *hates* what happened. Hates knowing that he caused his friends so much pain. Especially Mike, because he gets what Dustin is saying. Losing Dustin or Lucas would be devastating. But losing Mike...Will can’t imagine

it, can't imagine life without the boy who found him on that swing set and asked him to be his friend. His first friend. *God*.

"And then losing Eleven like that," Dustin says. "After she saved his life—*our* lives. After she found you and helped bring you back. He lost two people he was close to, all within, what, a week? And sure, you came back. But El...didn't. Like, I get why he's acting out. I don't *like* it, but I get it. Let's just hope he doesn't get like he was when you were missing. I mean, look at what happened at the quarry. Fucking reckless."

Will's head snaps up.

"But, like I said, I get it. He lost you, he lost Eleven, fuck, he thought he was gonna lose *me* too," Dustin continues. "It's like his worst fear came to life three times and exploded right in his face. So—"

"Wait, what happened at the quarry?"

Dustin's entire face falls. "Oh fuck. He didn't tell you. Of course he didn't tell you. Um."

"Dustin."

"Forget I said anything." Dustin moves to mount his bike but Will grabs onto his handlebars and his friend freezes where he stands.

"Dustin. *What happened at the quarry?* "

"Fuck, ok. Look, we ran into some trouble with Troy and James. They chased us to the quarry and Troy grabbed me. He had a knife and was yelling about how he was gonna cut my teeth out. Told Mike he'd do it unless Mike jumped off the cliff. So...Mike jumped."

*Jumped.*

Will's stomach knots, his mind conjuring images of his best friend falling, falling, falling, until his body hits the water—or the rocks, oh god the *rocks*—and never resurfaces.

"El must've heard us or something, 'cause she caught him with her mind powers and pulled him back up. Broke Troy's arm too. It was



really badass, actually.”

“He jumped,” Will repeats back.

*Mike jumped. He jumped.*

“Yeah. He jumped. I told him not to! Fuck, Troy’s nuts but he’s not *that* nuts. And even if he was...I mean, teeth will grow back, you know? Not ideal, but I wouldn’t’ve *died*. Like I said. Reckless.”

“Yeah...reckless.” Will releases Dustin’s handlebars. “Thanks for telling me.”

“Sure,” Dustin says, mounting his bike. He avoids Will’s gaze in favor of finding one of the pedals with his foot and getting his balance right, before adding, “I’ll see you tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah. See you tomorrow.”

Will watches as Dustin bikes away and stays out by the road long after his friend fades into the distance. He can’t stop thinking about it. Thinking about how he could have been rescued, could have come home only to find out that Mike was dead. Had jumped off a cliff to save their friend. It’s terrifying how real the possibility is, and Will can’t shake the vision of Mike’s body. Blue lips, clouded eyes, ashen skin. Those hands that Will has always dreamed of holding all stiff and wrinkled from the cold water.

Would the impact alone have killed him? Snapped his neck? Broken his back? Or would he have drowned—his body too shocked by the rush of cold water to fight back? Would his legs have broken, leaving him helpless and flailing while the lake closed in over his head?

Would it have been quick?

Or would he have suffered?

The sun begins to set, and the temperature drops with it. The golden light of Will’s house beckons him inside, but he can’t break the cycle of horrible visions. He needs to see Mike. Needs to see him warm and whole and breathing. So he grabs his bike and when his feet find the pedals, there’s nothing in the world that can stop him.

The shadows lengthen as the sun dips lower into the horizon, and Will tries not to imagine them as cold, dark fingers reaching for him as he steers his bike towards Mike's house. It's been months since he came back from the Upside Down, but he still finds himself pedaling frantically, wanting to reach his destination before the dark wins out over the sky.

The warm glow of Mike's porch lights draws him in. Even with Mike being all hard edges and biting remarks lately, his house still feels welcoming and safe. Will carefully lays his bike on the lawn and mounts the steps to the front door.

Mrs. Wheeler opens at his knock with a surprised look. "Will? What're you doing here?"

Right. Parents. Will blurts out the first lie that hits his tongue, "Mike forgot something at my house and I wanted to bring it to him."

"Oh, ok." Mrs. Wheeler steps back to let Will into the house. Then, a slight frown on her face, she asks that dreaded, tired question, "Does your mother know you're here?"

This time, though, it makes Will's blood run cold. There must be something on his face that tells Mrs. Wheeler all she needs to know because before he can squeak out an answer, she says, "I'll give her a call right now. Is she home?"

"Jonathan is," Will says.

"Ok, let me call him and tell him you're here."

"Thank you," Will breathes. He can't believe how *stupid* this was. Jonathan's going to wring his neck. And that'll be after his mom is through with him. How could he have so blindly left like that? He wonders if Jonathan's already noticed. If Jonathan thinks he disappeared again.

"I'll tell him you're welcome to stay the night, so he doesn't have to worry. But if you want him to come pick you up, I'll tell him you'll call him," Mrs. Wheeler says, her voice breaking through the buzzing of Will's thoughts. "Mike's up in his room," she adds, and Will

remembers exactly why he left like he did.

*God...Mike .*

Will thanks her again and runs up the stairs, heart pounding. From the bike ride, the upward scramble, the fear, the images in Will's mind where Mike's falling, Mike's drowning, *Mike's—*

—sprawled on his bed, staring up at the ceiling and fiddling with his radio.

Seeing him like that—alive and well and decidedly *not* dead at the bottom of the quarry—immediately soothes Will's nerves.

“Will?” Mike asks, dropping the radio and sitting up. “What’s going on? Are you ok?”

Will can't help but smile. Coming from most people, the question sounds trite and Will's tired of hearing it. Tired of being treated like glass. But Mike's never been like that.

“I'm ok,” Will says.

“What're you doing here?” Mike's eyes narrow, roaming over the beads of sweat cooling on Will's forehead and darkening the ends of his hair. “Did Jonathan drive you?”

“I biked.”

“*Will—*”

“It's fine—”

“But—”

“I'm *fine*.”

Mike sighs and backs down, jerking his head to beckon Will over and scooting to make room for him. Will sinks down next to him, maintaining a safe distance though all he wants to do is shift closer.

“So...what is it?” Mike asks. He still looks worried, like he can't

fathom why Will would show up at his house if something isn't terribly wrong. Will can't really blame him for that, though. And something *is* wrong, just not with Will. This time at least.

Will doesn't know where to start and the longer it takes him to say anything, the more nervous Mike seems to get.

"If it's about earlier, I'm sorry," Mike finally blurts out. "I really, really am. I shouldn't've lost it like that." Mike won't look up from his hands, as if he's scared of what Will's going to say.

"Oh, no. It's not about that," Will says. "I mean...that's something you should hash out with Lucas. But you and me? We're ok."

"Oh, ok. Good." Mike smiles and even though it doesn't quite reach his eyes, it's still warm.

"Yeah, no. It's...something else," Will says.

They lapse back into silence, but this time, Mike waits patiently while Will searches for how to begin. His stomach and chest feel tight, like he's standing at the edge of a precipice about to...well, *jump* .

The thought alone finally pushes the words out. "Dustin told me something earlier that really freaked me out, and I just...needed to see you."

"What did he say?" Mike asks, but with the way his eyes narrow, Will thinks Mike knows exactly what Dustin said.

Will takes a deep breath. "He told me about Troy. About what happened at the quarry. How you...jumped."

"Oh," Mike says, fidgeting with the sleeves of his sweater.

"Yeah." There's so much Will wants to say—*you're my best friend, don't leave me like that, what were you thinking*—but the words catch in his throat and he can't unstick them.

Mike huffs, that trigger-happy irritation flaring up. "I can't believe he told you. I'm gonna kill him."

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

Mike shrugs. “Wasn’t a big deal.”

“Not a—Mike you could’ve *died*.”

“But I didn’t.”

Something about that response sets Will off. There’s nothing warm in Mike’s face now, just a set jaw and eyes that meet his but don’t seem to actually *see* him. It feels like a brush-off, and Mike’s never done that. Not to Will. Not like this.

Doesn’t Mike understand how serious this is? How scared Will is? How heartbroken he would be if he lost Mike?

“That doesn’t matter. I mean, it does. Of course it does. It’s the only thing that matters,” Will splutters. “But you *could have*. God, Mike, what were you *thinking*?”

And like a whip, that temper cracks. “He was going to hurt Dustin! What was I supposed to do?”

“Something that didn’t involve *jumping off a cliff*!” Mike may have a temper, but Will isn’t as timid as everyone seems to think he is, and he needs to make Mike hear him. How can Mike talk about his life like it doesn’t mean anything? Like it doesn’t mean *everything* to Will?

“He had a *knife*, Will. He was gonna cut his fucking teeth out!”

“He wouldn’t have actually *done* it!”

“I couldn’t have known that!”

“Mike.”

“No! You didn’t see him. After you disappeared. He said shit about you at school. After they found your—the body. The whole town thought you were *dead* and he was making *jokes*.”

Mike’s voice cracks and his eyes mist over and all of Will’s anger and frustration dissipates.

“That’s awful,” he concedes.

Mike snorts and wipes a hand over his eyes. “Yeah.”

It’s no excuse to throw yourself off a cliff, though, and Will’s just about to tell him that when the corner of Mike’s mouth twitches up. Will freezes, not wanting to spoil the soft look that takes over Mike’s face.

“El made him piss himself,” Mike says. “Right in front of everyone.”

“I wish I could have met her. Like, *really* met her,” Will says, before he can think better of it. After what happened earlier, he feels like he’s playing with fire, one wrong move away from setting Mike off again. But he means it.

Mike surprises him by murmuring, “I wish you could have too.” There’s a beat of silence before Mike speaks again, his voice so soft that Will has to lean a little closer to hear him clearly. “I miss her. So much. She saved my life, she saved you. She deserved so much better. But as much as I miss her, I’m just so happy you’re ok. That you’re here and you’re *safe*. And it—” Mike breaks off and Will notices that he’s trembling slightly.

Will reaches out and rests his hand over Mike’s, desperate to do anything to soothe him because it looks like Mike’s coming apart at the seams. Mike hasn’t really *talked* about Eleven in months, and Will hopes that now can be the time for him to rip the bandage off and let the wound breathe a bit.

They still need to talk about the cliff, but for now Will’s willing to let Mike talk, let him work through this because there’s something broken in his best friend and all Will wants to do is help fix it.

“It makes me feel so *guilty*, Will,” Mike says, his voice cracking. “How can I be happy when she’s gone? When she’s...*god*, Will, she might be...what if she’s dead?” Will’s throat closes. This is the first time he’s heard Mike say that possibility out loud. With the way Mike’s lip trembles, he wonders if it’s the first time Mike’s let himself think it. “What if she died, protecting *me*? How can I be happy when this is my fault?”

“Your fault?” Will asks.

“I should have been faster. I should have been stronger.”

“Mike—”

“She was protecting me, Will. And she shouldn’t have *had* to. And— And I have the fucking *nerve* to still be *happy*. I’m a *horrible person*.” He buries his face in his hands, chest heaving painfully as the floodgates open and he begins to sob.

Will moves immediately, shifting over and draping an arm across Mike’s shoulders. He pulls Mike’s head against his chest and cradles him there, his free hand coming up to rest on the back of his neck. Tears soak Will’s sweater and his heart breaks with the boy in his arms.

No wonder Mike had been acting so strange. Will can’t imagine keeping these kinds of feelings in. The pain and anger and, oh god, the *guilt*. How could they have missed this? How could they have missed Mike blaming himself?

Mike’s sobs begin to die down and he leans further into Will, obviously exhausted. Will rests his cheek on the top of Mike’s head and risks moving his hand up into his hair. It’s soft and thick, just like he’s always imagined it’d be.

They sit like that for awhile longer, Mike slowly but surely calming down. Once his breath stops hitching, Will pulls back. Mike immediately hides his face in his hands.

“Mike,” Will says. “*Mike*. Look at me.” Mike doesn’t lift his head, so Will carefully pries his hands away and turns Mike’s face towards him. Flushed cheeks, swollen eyes, mussed hair, Mike’s still the most beautiful thing Will’s ever seen, and he would do anything to take his pain away. He can’t believe that Mike, *his Mike*, thinks he’s a horrible person. He leans in closer so Mike has no chance of not hearing him. “You are *not* a bad person. And what happened was *not* your fault. You have to know that.”

Mike snuffles and a fresh wave of tears leaks out. Will reaches over to

wipe them away, just barely refraining from letting his hands linger on the soft skin of Mike's cheeks. He can't spare any distraction, not when Mike's a mess like this.

"You're the best person I know. You've always been there for me, for all of us. You would do anything for your friends, and you care more than anybody I've ever met. Besides," Will says. "*I'm* the one who got taken. I dragged you all into this mess."

"Will, that's not—"

"And what about Dustin and Lucas?"

"What?"

"They were there too, right?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"Do you blame *them*?"

"No, of course not! I—"

"And Eleven?"

"What do you mean?"

"She opened the gate, didn't she?"

"That's different! It was an accident. It wasn't her fault!"

"It's not your fault either! None of it is! Me getting taken, Eleven's...disappearance. Don't you see that?" Mike shakes his head but Will presses on. "Mike, what she did? That was *her* choice. You can't blame yourself for that. You don't blame me for getting taken, and you don't blame her for opening the gate. Because those things were out of our control, right?"

Tentatively, Mike nods.

"Dustin and Lucas were there too, and you don't blame them, right?"

Another nod.



“So how can you blame yourself for what happened to her? How are you any different?”

Mike looks down at his hands, which he has pulled into the sleeves of his sweater. The fabric strains under the force of his grip and Will wants to touch him so badly, to pull his hands into his and soothe him. But there’s more he needs to say, more he needs to unpack, and he needs to get everything out before he loses his nerve.

“It’s ok to be happy, even when you’re sad. There’s no right way to deal with all of this. You can grieve her, and miss her, and still be happy about other things, ok? You’re still here, the Party’s still here, *I’m* still here. You guys brought me home, and we’re *safe* now. And from everything you guys have told me about her, I think Eleven would want you to be happy.”

Mike looks up and his mouth twitches into the shadow of a smile. Will wants to kiss the corner of it, to chase away the lingering pain he sees there.

But there’s something else. Something Mike’s holding back. Will can see it in the tense line of his shoulders and the way Mike’s grip on his sleeves won’t let up. Normally, Will wouldn’t push. But Mike’s been carrying these burdens alone for too long, and Will won’t stop until he’s overturned every stone, unearthed the roots of every problem, no matter how deep they go.

“You can tell me anything, Mike. What is it?”

Mike takes so long to answer that Will wonders if he read him wrong.

“When you went missing, I just. I felt like I couldn’t breathe,” Mike finally says. “Like I was going to die. Like living without you was impossible, you know?”

Will does. Closes his eyes, sees Mike step off that cliff, and understands perfectly.

A deep, hidden part of himself can’t help but wonder if his disappearance made it that much easier for Mike to jump.

“But then El showed up,” Mike continues. “And she was so fierce, and

brave, and beautiful. And I loved her.”

The confession stirs something in Will’s stomach as he watches Mike’s lips form the word “loved”. The way his voice rasps as he sounds out the letters makes Will’s face flush. While he’s heard Mike say every version of the word “love”, he means it differently this time and Will wants to soak it all in—the cadence of his voice, the look in his eyes.

But none of it is for Will and he fights to keep his face neutral even as his heart squeezes. He can’t let Mike see how much it hurts. Now’s not the time to make him feel even worse.

Mike runs a hand through his hair, the ends curling slightly under his fingers. “At least, I think I did. I don’t know. She was just...amazing. And I think I loved her.”

“I’m sorry, Mike. I’m so sorry.”

“There’s more.”

Will waits, shifting just a fraction closer.

Mike’s face pinches and Will knows they’re getting to the root of this last problem. “Promise...promise you won’t hate me,” Mike whispers.

“*Hate* you?” Will actually laughs. “God, Mike, I *couldn’t*.” Mike looks at him and Will sees that he’s completely serious. “Friends don’t lie,” Will adds, and that seems to comfort him slightly.

“I think I loved her,” Mike says again, taking a deep breath. “But I don’t think I loved her—I don’t think I *could have* loved her—as much as I love you.”

Will would’ve felt less shocked if Mike had slapped him right across the face. Is he messing with him? *Friends don’t lie*, he reminds himself. *Friends don’t lie, friends don’t lie, friends don’t lie.*

*Please don’t be lying.*

But Mike’s eyes are fixed on Will’s lips, his body leaning forward like Will’s drawing him in with some invisible, magnetic force, and Will *knows* he’s not lying. Those words are for *him*. And before he can

think better of it, he leans in to meet him.

They both pause when only a few centimeters separate their lips, giving each other time to back out. But Will doesn't want to, not when faced with everything he's always wanted. Mike apparently doesn't want to back out either, and he's the one who finally closes the distance.

The kiss is chaste and hesitant, but it's also warm and gentle and the heat blooming in Will's chest distinctly feels like *home*. It's his first kiss and he feels a little silly, like he should be doing more, but Mike cups his face and his worries melt away. Losing himself in his best friend's lips, he sneaks his hands into Mike's hair.

But then Mike's pulling away, far too fast, and Will mourns the loss of the closeness for a moment before registering the look on Mike's face. It's a strange mix of awe, joy, and absolute *terror*.

"W-What? What's wrong?" Will asks. "Did I...?" *Read things wrong? Make you uncomfortable? Screw this up?*

"No! No, it's not you. You're great. Wonderful, actually. Just...perfect. Fuck." Mike's flailing, eyes way too wide and hands coming up to grip his hair, shaking loose more curls. His grip looks painful, so Will carefully pries his hands away.

"Slow down," he says, feeling like a hypocrite with his own body shaking like a leaf.

"Right. Ok." Mike takes a deep breath and squeezes Will's hands. "I can't remember a time when I didn't want you by my side. When I didn't want to hold your hand, to keep you safe. But it—this...*scares me*, Will. What if what I'm feeling isn't...real?"

That's...not what Will expected. "What do you mean?"

"How I felt for Eleven...how I feel for you. What if it's not...what if I was using her to cope with losing you? What if I'm using you to cope with losing her? What if I'm just scared, and none of what I'm feeling is actually *real*?" Mike swallows hard, his eyes growing wet again. "And what if I just ruined our friendship over something that isn't

real? I can't...I can't lose you again. I don't think I could stand it. I think it would kill me, Will."

Will's mouth runs dry as he thinks about the cliff. All he can think about is that stupid *cliff*. He wonders if Mike still thinks about it too.

Will turns Mike's hands over in his, thumbs rubbing soothing circles into his palms. They're both trembling now, but Will's so in love with this boy and no matter what doubts Mike has—no matter how much Will's mind whispers that this is too good to be true and he's not worthy—he's sure that Mike loves him too. It's in everything he does. In every arm thrown over his shoulder, every "Will, are you ok?"

Mike's always been there for him, has always been the strong one. It's time for Will to be strong for him now.

"Let me tell you what I think, ok?" He waits for Mike to nod. "I think that, yes, you're scared. You lost me, then you lost her. Of course you're scared, Mike. But you can't let fear make you doubt everything else you're feeling. I didn't see you with Eleven, but I know you, and I know how much you care about people. And I think you did love her. In some way at least."

Mike's eyes shoot to Will's face. He looks wary, like he's searching for something. Disappointment? Disapproval?

No. Will knows that look. It's the same one often paired with a "Will, are you ok?". Mike's worried that he's *hurt*. Will's surprised to find that he's not. Can't be, with Mike's warmth still lingering on his lips. So Will smiles and squeezes his hands even tighter before trying his best to alleviate Mike's fear. "I think you love me too. You took action as soon as I disappeared. I'm home because of you, because you didn't give up on me. I would never doubt how much you care about me. Everything else? We can figure that out. Together."

Will cups the side of Mike's face, thumb brushing over the freckles under his eye. Mike leans into the touch and Will sighs softly as he tucks a loose strand of hair behind Mike's ear. "I want you to know that I love you too, no matter what happens. You will *never* lose me again."

Mike surges forward and practically headbutts Will as he throws his long, skinny arms around him. Pressing his cheek against Mike's hair, Will holds him right back, squeezing just as tightly.

"So I got it right, huh?"

Mike laughs wetly against Will's collarbone. "Yeah. I think you did."

They lie back on Mike's bed, legs tangled and Mike cradled against Will's chest. Whenever Will imagines cuddling with him—at night, usually, before he drifts off to sleep—he always imagines their positions reversed, with Will tucked away in the protective grip of Mike's arms. He likes this just as much, though, the warm weight of Mike's head, the soft brush of his curls against Will's chin, the slight point of his nose pressing into Will's chest as Mike shuffles even closer.

"You've gotta promise that I won't lose you either," Will says after a while. There's still a horrible lump in his chest from Dustin's story and he can't let it rest. "I can't stop thinking about you jumping off that cliff. I don't know what I would've done if I'd come back and you hadn't been here."

"I'm sorry."

Will holds him impossibly closer, fighting back his own tears now. "I just need you to promise me that you won't do something stupid. No matter what happens. I can't stand the thought of you getting hurt. Of you...not being here. God, *Mike*."

The tears spill out and Will's breath hitches. Mike squeezes him, murmuring a mantra of "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please don't cry, I'm sorry, I promise."

Will leans down and tries to put every feeling in his aching heart into the press of his lips against Mike's forehead.

It's gotten late and Will knows his mom must be fretting—can practically *feel* her worry. He steels himself to pull away, but then Mike buries his nose further into Will's shirt and whispers, "Stay."

Well, when Mike asks him like *that*—like he needs Will there to hold

him together—how could Will possibly say no? Just one glance at those freckles, that mussed hair, those big brown eyes and, *god*, Will wants to stay. Needs to, just as much as Mike needs him to. The thought of letting Mike go is physically painful. He'd almost lost him, and he hadn't even known it. And now that he does, Will's scared that if he leaves now, Mike will disappear. Will simply vanish from Will's life, as if he never even existed.

Will wonders if this is how Mike's been feeling all this time.

His mom and Jonathan will worry, but Mrs. Wheeler said he was welcome to stay. And that she'd tell Jonathan that too, so Will should be in the clear. Besides, this is worth it. Mike is always worth it.

"Ok," he whispers, resting his cheek against the top of Mike's head. If Mike needs an anchor, he's got one.

The role reversal feels strange, and it fills Will with more tenderness and protectiveness than he ever thought possible.

He falls asleep to the steady puffs of his best friend's breath against his collarbone. He sleeps so deeply that he doesn't even stir at the sound of the door opening and Mrs. Wheeler's soft, affectionate sigh as she turns out the lights.

It's the best sleep Will's had in months. He thinks it's the best sleep Mike's had in just as long.

He wakes up the next morning to the press of his best friend's lips against his temple. As he turns to meet him, noses brushing and lips catching, he thinks he would give anything to wake up to Mike's sleep-softened face every morning. Mike still looks nervous, like he's not sure if the kissing is ok. Will tries to chase away those doubts by kissing him right back. Again and again.

Everything's still tricky. With Mike so nervous about his feelings, Will knows there's a possibility of him getting hurt. But he can't be afraid. Not with Mike. Not with Mike holding him close with such obvious relief and joy and affection. Not with him sending warmth throughout Will's entire body with every kiss.

“You’re here,” Mike whispers against his lips. “*Safe.*”

“So are you,” Will says, pressing closer.

Will wants to stay here forever, trading kisses and tangling his fingers in Mike’s hair. Lifetimes could pass and Will doesn’t think he would ever grow tired of it. But he’s already spent the night away and he knows his mom’s likely been worrying the whole time. After everything, he owes her as much peace of mind as he can give.

Mike walks him to the front door and, glancing around quickly to make sure no one can see them, he swoops in for one more kiss, swallowing Will’s giggle.

Yeah, Will’s not worried. Scared or not, Mike’s feelings burn brighter than the sun and Will just needs to give him time to come to terms with it. To separate it from the guilt and grief and pain.

And Will can wait for him. Will can always wait for Mike.

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Later that morning, when Will’s back at home and he retches up another slug, he feels fear gnaw away at his newfound joy. Because he’s not as safe as Mike thinks. And he knows that whatever happens next has the power to destroy them both.

But as he washes out his mouth, his fingers linger on his lips and there’s a small, inextinguishable flare of hope still. Whatever this means, whatever happens, Will and Mike will face it together.

And they’ve always been stronger together.

### **Author's Note:**

Oof idk why I let myself do this, I had so much trouble capturing Will and Mike, they just did not want to make things easy for me.

But, in any case, hope you enjoyed! I played a little fast and loose with canon (it’s been awhile since I’ve watched season 2, and even longer since I’ve

watched season 1), so please forgive any OOC-ness.